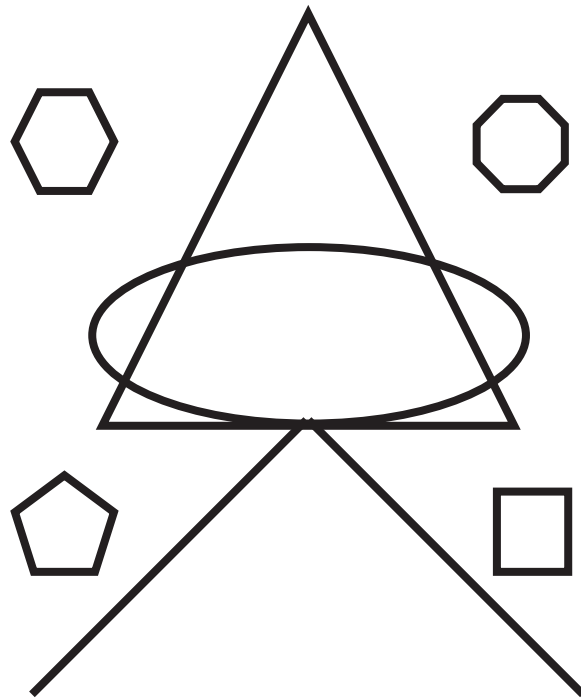


# THE METROPOLIS

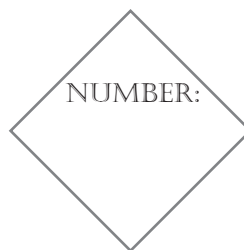


PART II:  
BELOW  
THE DOME

This copy of  
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Part II: Below the Dome  
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The Metropolis Epic is dedicated to Rowan.



# THE METROPOLIS



## PART II: BELOW THE DOME

Thunder broke distantly as we looked down upon the earth. Lightning bolts spider-webbed between vaporous girths and valleys in far-off clouds.

“This storm will chase us down before long,” said Llagalard. “Let us see what we can upon this peak, while we can still see it.”

Llagalard and I had emerged from the Snail’s shaft near the top of Spire: a needle which scratched the top of the sky. I regained my footing there with just a moment of teetering, and then came my sight to the light of the world. We stood now on a balcony which circumscribed the Spire’s white stone, beseeched by winds. I was clinging gratefully to a tall railing twisted out of taught volcanic sediment and festooned with ornate patterns and cryptic etchings. The clouds grew thick just below us, but the sun’s waning reflection was enough to light our surroundings.

“From here, you can see the four corners of the wall,” said Llagalard. “Dim as the light is, they are silhouetted against the lands beyond them, which each have their own sun, far away.”

I took a moment to look for landmarks of our journey, and saw most clearly the Western tower, a well defined, shell-shaped point against the Crystal Realm's subsequent pearly glow. The Northern Breach, shrouded in mist as always, was also close to us, and visible where the wall fell away to the icy River of Sublimity, its cold blue water seemingly repellent of Absitru's fog. There I saw the Golem in all its great height and ancient, breathless movements. Even from here, it looked enormous - a giant of stone moving with a steady articulation which reminded me of God's clockwork in my own land. The Southern Well was hidden to me, set against the wall which loomed above it in my line of site, but I knew its location by a vast plume of topaz smoke rising from the two twisting serpents in their nearby fire. The Eastern Tower, which I shuffled 'round the balcony to gaze upon, was not visible at all - it took the shadows of dusk close to it, like a black cloak sewn to storm clouds, breathing in a tempest from the Dull Sea.

"Where does this foul weather come from?" I asked, knowing only the atmospheric will of the clock-setters in my own land. I suspected perhaps more could be said of a storm's whim here than the obtuse parliamentary caution of the setter's bench.

"We do not ask that question here," said Llagalard. "To tempt the storm's causality is to invite it into the self, and to invite it in is to grow it stronger."

Her eyes were distant as she said this, watchful of those clouds. I wondered why she gazed so, this splendid priestess -- had she seen something in her study which hinted at a dark time to come? I ventured to put my hand on her shoulder, feeling emboldened with emotion, as can be born of lightning's gloomy spit. She let it stay there.

"Each action we take, it stirs the new," she said, gazing absently over the storm. "Here on the Spire, we can see the blooming truth of this. It is in the sad eyes, the eyes of the angles, they are listening to us - even you. And as they carve their future histories, we are knit into their imaginings in tiny ways. Each breath we take adds to the vortex winds which will carry us in spirals across the ages."

She pointed upward, and I looked up and noticed, for the first time, the swirling angels above us. They were not easy to see, for they were faint of skin, almost translucent, few and fast. Yet - they were there, perhaps a dozen of them, swooping like swallows in and out of the clouds. Great wings, like albatross wings, beat from their gaunt backs against those vapors.

"We will go higher," Llagalard said. "Perhaps this will answer the question in your heart. We will see the highest point of the tower, beyond where humans like you and I can hold our footing. Then we will go down again to earth, to the realms most thronged by man. I will call on Seraphinnius to carry us - do not fear him when he comes."

After pausing to look one last time to the East, Llagalard made a series of strange, subtle movements with her hands. Her eyes closed in concentration, and I prepared myself, taking my hand from her shoulder to steady myself against the rail. I closed my eyes as well. This was out of necessity -- for a waxing torrent of night wind, beat by the Angel's wing, fell suddenly upon my face.

## 1. THE FUTURE'S RINGS

Seraphinnius was as tall as four normal men standing on each other's shoulders. His skin was so fair as to be nearly glass, and his face seemed ancient and wrinkled, beset by hollow cheeks and a great shining brow leading to a balded head. Despite the Angel's creased face he was beautiful - his body strong, his attribution somehow retaining youthfulness against time and his mouth set in a beatific lack of expression, as though he was looking past you with those saucer eyes. From his back, just below his shoulders, spread two immense wings, which beat slowly against the air to keep him aloft before us. They were white feathered, but plumed in patterns that did not hint at birds. Rather, the fronds twisted in a manner that recalled the direction-less, swirling self obsession of water flowing over stones, making form of air as they folded, in and out, in synchronous pulses.

"Sire," I said to him, "I am pleased to meet you here."



But the Angel did not respond, instead cocking his head vaguely sideways and pursing his blue lips.

"The Angels do not speak to mortal women or men," said my guide. "They communicate with the language of the spheres alone. However, as I am sure you have sensed, they are not deaf to your aspect. They can see the way you move through material and time together. As children of the upper heavens they have great insight into your workings and ways."

Seraphinnius reached out a long, strangely jointed arm and put a finger on my chest. Where it touched me, through my coat, I could feel a warm feeling, but not his finger's press. The Angel reacted suddenly upon touching me: a shiver running through his body, and though he did not remove his finger he beat his wings faster, as though

he wished to leave. Llagalard stepped forward, then, and made a sign with her hands. The Angel watched her solemnly, removed his arm and bowed his head, looking at me no more.

"You are ever odd, Traveler," said Llagalard as she gathered up her cloak-hems and opened a hatch in the balcony railing. "First the Norns come to you through Absitru's mist, and now causing distress in an Angel of the highest order. I'm no longer certain this brewing storm is not a toast of some kind to your coming."

Still, despite her words, she smiled at me, and then stepped lightly off the rail into Seraphinnius' waiting embrace. With some cajoling, I soon did the same, and we were born aloft in the arms of the angel, higher toward the heavens, where stars were just now beginning to pierce the darkening sky.

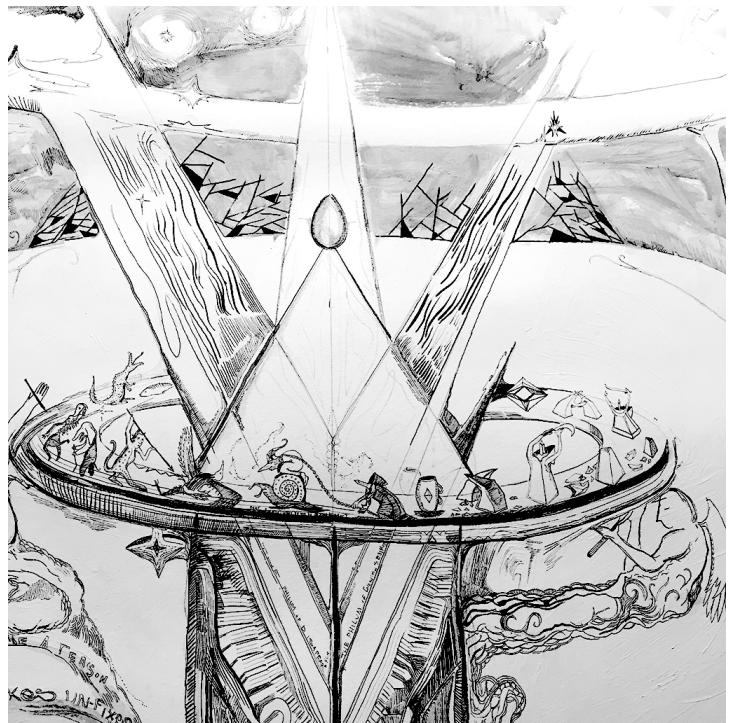
As we were born upward, passing through cloud thick as soup, I saw the top of the spire was not a mere needle but was ringed with an ethereal band, seemingly made of light itself, as though the ring of some distant planet. The ring carved a great circle, spanning far enough outward from the spire that to walk it would take perhaps the time it takes to speak the central chorus of Andervox, and its width was enough to bear a

three horse chariot upon it. This ring was hanging not in a gravity starved orbit, however. As we approached from below I could see it was supported by three gallant struts - the spire dividing itself into a trident, and each arm was anchored to the ring by a silver mechanism that apparently can fasten the physical to the numinous. In the place where the three divisions of the spire joined I could see a glassy egg had been mounted.

“Here we see the future being concocted/observed by the angelic cohorts,” said Llagalard. “These rings have moved upward over time, and so long as the present and future are close, they spin. Then, when their dialectic aspect becomes too tightly knit the Angels erect a new one above it, and the old ring dissolves to become history, its memories etched into the growing needle’s facets.”

Seraphinnius swooped quickly around the ring and I was surprised not to feel the turn of inertia in my gut as we flew. There was not merely air and vapor below the ring. Where the struts met its glow several angels were hovering in the air and working, seemingly adjusting its tilt or tightening or loosening its connections to the tower. Like our Seraphinnius, they were graceful and tall, and bore expressions of such complete lucidity as to seem to be cloud forms themselves. They were men and women, and their hands bore instruments with which they worked fastidiously upon the fastenings.

After a couple of turns around the ring, Seraphinnius brought us level with its upper face and I could see that it too was not unpeopled -- it bore two legions of strange creatures, or things like creatures at least. On the westward side stood many dozens of odd, clothed animals, bearing spears and other weapons. On the Eastern side, a troop of stony forms advanced upon them, like little, narrow pyramids but vaguely humanoid, and also bearing arms including swords and hatchets. These beings, which did not seem to me alive so much as like puppets, appeared to be in the process of some kind of battle. Where they met, they were rending each other repeatedly and with a kind of cartoonish violence that was not disturbing, but rather absurd. I watched as a bipedal tiger wearing pantaloons prodded a prone swan, and as two cairns of masonry swatted each other with scimitars.



“This is the ring of our current time,” said Llagalard, “It has become decadent, confined to a pageantry of struggle in which participant monastic actors are busy reducing each other to dust. They hardly interact anymore except to further disintegrate themselves, having separated to discrete hemispheres. Look there, where they meet, a fledgling snail of becoming has been born, though he is mounted by a Northwesterly dwarf, and shackled to some ambulating edifice of the East. We are at the end of our time.”

Llagalard shifted in the arms of Seraphinnius and gave him a tug on his little finger. The angel responded by beating his wings hastily and swooping even higher up, to where the trident tips reached their ends at last. There I could see another ring, more faint than the one now below us. It was spinning there. One very beautiful angel was supporting its side with her two hands, carefully nudging it as it wobbled.

“A glimpse of the future,” Llagalard said, in tones that seemed hushed against the ever present wind.

It was so dark now that I can't be sure if my eyesight was true as to what I saw, but my memory seems sure of it, either because of some precipitous clarity in the ring's spectral light or because the way of interpretation ascertains certainty in despite of fact. On one end of the spinning ring, I saw a white dove with feet outstretched like a raptor's claws, attacking a serpent who writhed. On the other side, I saw a man holding some sort of lens above him, looking through it to the sky. On the ring beside him, as if an afterthought, was a small, brass clock.

A clock, I thought - a sign from my own land! I nearly laughed at that. How unlikely.

We hovered in silence for a while there, Seraphinnius' wings beating slowly against the air. After some time, feeling restless, I maneuvered in my arm-hold to look at Llagalard's face. Her eyes were wide, and her face blanched. She appeared to me suddenly like a gargoyle, and would not look back at me. Then, she tapped our angel on the arm, and we dove back down at great speed.

I could not, as I imagined I would, look upon the carved histories upon the tower's sides. We moved down through the air like a diving gannet, too quickly to take stock of anything, and the light had anyway become too dim. In my mind's eye, I can now see those carvings in stone: complexly shifting movements of pattern and form, meandering through the ages. I have now become familiar enough with the Metropolis' sinuous histories to recount what must be there: The Age of the Hydra at the top, with its bastions of many headed serpents upending harmonies. Lower down would be Gorice's War, and his empty reign before it. Then the mysterious time of the Foundling Priests, then the time of the Wanderers and their Bringings. Before that, I wasn't sure. Maybe the dragon was there, or maybe not. At last, the Snail of Becoming -- with its gaping mouth, which I had seen in its glorious relief from the ground before entering. But I saw none of this from my cradle in the Angel's arms. On that night there was just a blur of stone beside us while we swam earthward through the onyx air.



We paused once atop the last cloud bank clinging to the tower's sides, now dark gray rather than white. I saw there were several angels sitting pensively upon the vapors. Three of them were in a small group, one holding a mirror at his feet, which reflected only the grayness of the sky. Another clutched a bow and arrow, and she was looking mournfully at its broken string. The last was reading a book, her eyes nearly shut, the book partially buried in the cloud. Other angels seemed to be half lost in the billows, either sleeping or caught somehow in its folds. I was surprised by these angels on the cloud, who seemed so still and morose compared to the busy technicians of the spire's heavenward rings.

We hovered there expectantly for a moment, Seraphinnius strafing left and right for various vantages on the seated angels, but Llagalard said nothing. I looked at her and saw her jaw was still set tensely, and she would not look at me. A strange murk of hesitation lit upon us, and this was the first moment I began to feel disquiet about my guide. It was a thin, placeless worry which in all truth was a selfish worry about my own fate, were she to forsake me now.

Much later, Llagalard would relate to me a thin theorem about a loss of faith in the rings by some of the angels, and how several had become apathetic to its cause. These angels sat for long recesses in the nether-regions of the clouds. The woman of the bow, lost to fear of doing harm, the man of the mirror, waiting for his own image to appear, the woman of the book, subsumed in the endless sarcoma of the page. It was from these low clouds that the fallen angel on the Eastern beach had come, brought crashing to earth by the weight of the urn of truth, and now ever the prey of the stalking panther.

“The balance between objective and subjective futurity is the bane of the angels,” Llagalard would say to me one day. “Like for all creativity in heaven or on earth, this balance is the crux of how we shape ourselves. The angels, at their best, trust their heavenly minds. When they are weak, they are weighed down by doubt of their wings. Now, at the end of our cycle, before the new ring has set itself in true motion, there is much doubt among the angelic choir.”

Now, however, she would not say these things now. Apparently, she would not say anything at all. When Seraphinnius realized her silence was unfaltering, he beat his wings pensively one more time, rising a spark-width or two higher into the sky, then he fell forward to continue his dive.

We broke through those thick clouds clinging to the tower and I saw the million lights of the Metropolis’ miraculous central Dome. Hidden to me previously by the clouds, I was now in awe. It was as if another sky was below me, pierced all through with stars of myriad colors and forms. I saw then the top of the Dome, that opulent and gargantuan structure under which I was to soon travel. Below it the great majority of the Metropolis’ citizens live, and it was shining with a tepid blue and purple glow as the thousands of lamps within it refracted through its complex glass facets in a kaleidoscopic fashion.

We touched the ground not far from where we had started our journey up the Spire. It was dark now, and blunt darts of rain were beginning to fall. When lightning struck, jarring my bones, I saw the silhouette of the Spire’s base rising from its clutch of titanic boulders. In this light, with cold mist playing upon the collar I had gathered around my bare neck, the Spire was hardly the sight of beauty and awe it had seemed in the afternoon’s light. Instead, I was filled with horror by its bulk.

Llagalard, who still had not spoken to me, looked at Seraphinnius and nodded. The angel returned the gesture, and began to beat his wings, lifting himself slowly up as if holding a sponge against a million drops of frigid rain. Before he receded into the black air he turned to me and looked with those black pearls of eyes. Again, I felt them crawl through me like a finger through a bowl of rice grains. Then, the angel was gone. Great thunderclaps were sounding, and Llagalard turned away from me as well. I awoke from my stupor and scrambled over wet rock to follow her, anxious to get away from this bald and vicious storm.

## 2. A PUFF OF KARSTE

We found the tent where Llagalard’s sister and her family had overnighted near the base of the Spire by following its lamp-light through sheets of rain. We were like lost moths. Once inside, an utter and complete exhaustion hit me, and I hardly noticed as Llagalard disrobed, dried off with a loose sheet of cloth and crawled beneath a blanket to sleep. She did this all without a glance at me, withering or otherwise, and I followed suit, happy to be rid of my wet cloaks as well. Soon I had joined the family of three and my priestess guide in our individual slumbers, pressed into dimensions of dream which I would not later recall. All night,